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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000355

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA
PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: ICRC REQUESTS USG ASSISTANCE IN RESTARTING FAMILY
TRAVEL FROM GOLAN TO SYRIA

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. This cable is an action request, please see para nine.

12. (C) SUMMARY: Mr. Jean-Jacques Frsard, the Head of Delegation in Syria for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), delivered a demarche to Charge d'Affaires on May 13, requesting USG assistance in persuading the Government of Israel (GOI) to allow residents of the Golan Heights to visit their family members in Syria. Such visits by Golan residents to Syria had been permitted after 1967. In 1992, however, the GOI blocked the continuation of such visits. Frsard argued U.S. efforts to restart a visitation program between the Golan and Syria might prove a useful building-block for future attempts to facilitate dialogue between Syria and Israel. Further, the action might also serve as an easy, non-political, good-will gesture toward Arabs in general. The ICRC expected to demarche the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv on this subject in the near future. Frsard left a non-paper, the text of which is included below. END SUMMARY.

ICRC Plan

13. (C) Frsard informed us there is an increasingly strong desire among Syrian families living in the Golan to visit the sizable displaced Golan population in Syria, which ICRC had estimated at between 250,000 to 300,000. The ICRC, Frsard explained, had devised a plan whereby 100 people at a time could travel from the Golan to Syria for a two-week stay. Once that group returned, another group of 100 could travel, and so on.

Syrian and Israeli Reactions

14. (C) "There are no problems on the Syrian side" with the idea of visits, Frsard reported, "and the Israelis are not against the idea as such; that is, we've not been told 'no.'" The Israelis had, however, made a counterproposal wherein families from the Golan and Syria could meet on UNDOF facilities in Kuneitra for a couple of hours at a time, he said, and immediately added, "We are against this idea." As for Syrian acquiescence, Frsard noted the SARG's expressed willingness might depend on foreknowledge of the Israeli's refusal. Should the Israelis be brought around, he

continued, the Syrian position could very well shift as well.

U.S. Role

15. (C) Frsard proposed the U.S. join the ICRC in lobbying the GOI to permit the 100-person visit program, beginning first with women, children, and the elderly to assuage any security fears either side might initially have. "I thought, given all the other (regional) difficulties, that this kind of deal might be more easily achieved than the Palestinian- and Syrian-tracks," Frsard offered. He argued further that U.S. involvement on the issue might enhance confidence building measures on other regional political tracks as well. "This is not a political or sensitive issue, but a humanitarian one," he remarked. When asked whether ICRC had contacted the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, he said 'no,' but that they would soon deliver the same demarche.

16. (C) The Charge asked Frsard who else the ICRC had contacted on this issue, to which he answered "the Turks and the French." While the French had not provided much of a response, Frsard believed the Turks were interested in the idea, since they were seeking a way to resume their mediating role between Syria and Israel. "They've been looking for something to jump-start their role again," he told us. While the Turks did view the proposal favorably, he noted, they did not appear overly optimistic about succeeding on that front. (Comment: Frsard did not tell us whether this subject would be raised during President Gul's recent visit

DAMASCUS 00000355 002 OF 003

to Syria. End Comment)

ICRC Optimism

17. (C) Frsard appeared optimistic about the possibility for success on Golan visitations. He noted the ICRC still enjoyed some success in facilitating the transfer of Golan residents to Syria, notably with students and Druze pilgrims, and for the last four years with apple crops. The students, he said, study in Syria for five to six years before returning to the Golan. The Syrians do not permit them to stay because they do not want to see the Syrian population diminish in the Golan Heights, Frsard reasoned, since maintaining the Golan Heights Syrian population was an element of the Syrians' claim to the territory. Frsard expressed pride over the successful shipment of apples from the Golan into Syria, saying, "for once everyone is happy." The SARG, he mused, is viewed as helping its Golan brethren; the Golan farmers had increased their incomes; and Israeli apple farmers no longer competed with their counterparts in the Golan.

18. (C) The Charge told Frsard the Embassy would raise the issue with Washington, adding, "we will note your idea that Israel may be the bigger obstacle." To which Frsard responded, "Yes, but you never know. Syria will say 'yes' when they know the other side will say 'no.'" He did not suppose the SARG would make a serious effort derail a visitation program, but might slow things down with its desire to "tinker with the details."

19. (C) COMMENT/ACTION REQUEST: If, as Frsard supposed, the SARG does not oppose the ICRC visitation program, then it does not appear Post has a specific role pressing the issue here. We would, however, appreciate the Department's guidance as to how to respond to Frsard.

110. (C) Contents of non-paper text Frsard passed to the Charge.

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Visits by Golan residents to their families in Syria took place under ICRC auspices until 1992. These visits were always one-way, and it was never considered possible that families from Damascus could visit their relatives on the occupied Golan Heights.

Until 1992, the Israeli authorities allowed people to travel to Syria for several days at a time. There were no clear criteria for granting permission in the first place or for determining the length of their stay in Syria. (Some applications were turned down.)

In 1992, these visits came to a halt. It seems that the Syrians refused entry to a person whose visit had been authorized by the Israelis. The Israelis then made it known to the Syrians that either all those authorized by them to visit Syria should be allowed in, or no-one at all would be authorized. The Syrians invoked their national sovereignty and the Israelis thereupon blocked access to all Golan residents. At the time, the ICRC thought that this was an administrative problem that would eventually sort itself out. But 16 years later, nothing has changed.

The ICRC delegation in Tel Aviv has taken many initiatives to find a solution, but without success. In the past three years, the Israeli representatives contacted by the ICRC have always expressed some understanding for the organization's requests, though this has never resulted in practical steps being taken.

What the ICRC is asking for is simple -- that the 20,000 Syrian inhabitants of the Golan Heights be allowed, if they so desire, to take turns visiting their relatives, there being some 300,000 people displaced from the Golan living elsewhere in Syria, above all in Damascus.

DAMASCUS 00000355 003 OF 003

One practical proposal is the following: 100 persons at a time could cross the demarcation line for a two-week stay in Syria. Once that group has returned, another group of 100 persons would leave the Golan across the demarcation line, and so on. It would be wise to ensure that the initial groups consisted solely of women, children and old people, so as to eliminate any security issues until the programme is well under way.

The people would cross the line under ICRC auspices, as do four to five hundred students and some 500 Druze pilgrims every year already. Two years ago, the ICRC even built a small office in Kuneitra, on the demarcation line, from which to run this programme.

Remarks

The Israelis regularly propose an alternative to these family visits by suggesting brief family reunions, i.e. that people could travel from both sides to Kuneitra and visit with their relatives for several hours on the demarcation line, before returning home. The ICRC prefers not to even discuss this proposal, which would doubtless be a cause of enormous frustration and would present practical difficulties.

It is not true to say that Golanese living on different sides of the demarcation line have no means of keeping in touch. These days it is possible to telephone from occupied Golan to the rest of Syria, though it is not possible the other way around. And those with the energy and the means can try to organize a family visit in Jordan or elsewhere. But most Golanese cannot afford this. Therefore this is a matter of real humanitarian concern, with many thousands of people deprived indefinitely, for political reasons, of seeing their loved ones.

-----End Text-----

